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J. Randy Forbes
United States Congress
4th District, Virginia

May 23, 2013

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The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write to express my continued concern regarding the disability claims backlog. Its lack of resolution and growing severity poses a serious threat to the credibility of the Veterans Benefits Administration. With a national average of 272 days, your stated goal of processing a claim in 125 days is not being met and appears to have gotten less attainable in the last four years. Despite installing the Veterans Benefit Management System (VBMS) in all 56 regional offices, nearly 97% of disability claims are still processed on paper. You have publically promised to eliminate the accumulation of claims by 2015, and I am eager to know in more detail than what you have published in the *Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog*, how the Veterans Benefits Administration plans to achieve this feat. As the backlog stands today, coupled with its projected growth this year, I disappointedly sense that indications are such that it will not be fulfilled.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has enjoyed a 40% increase in their budget since 2009. Additionally, President Obama's budget request for Fiscal Year 2014 seeks to allocate \$136 million specifically for the purpose of reducing the backlog of disability claims; however, all of this investment has produced lackluster results. The inability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to resolve the backlog with its growing resources seems to exemplify significant flaws in current strategy. With a steady increase in claims and a projected one million cases expected in the coming year, it is imperative that the Veterans Benefits Administration adapt in a way that provides prompt and quality care to all veterans, while executing claims expeditiously.

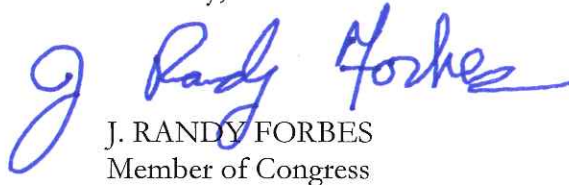
Speaking on behalf of the active duty, retirees and other veterans who I represent for Virginia's Fourth District, I have a few specific queries regarding efforts to resolve this issue and urge you to consider the following:

1. Please provide in detail the benchmarks, metrics and deadlines your Department established to measure the progress and help you achieve your goal of eliminating backlog by 2015?
2. What additional measures are you taking to prepare for the aforementioned surge in disability claims this year?

3. What obstacles remain in the process to make all disability claims paperless? What is the projected end date of that conversion? Does the VA plan to continue using the paper files until those present paper claims are completed?
4. The VA has potentially made more than 400,000 errors in rating claims over the past three years. What is being done to reduce the time veterans are waiting to have their claims reviewed and re-adjudicated?
5. The VA has recently announced a program to expedite claim decisions for Veterans who have waited a year or more. How exactly will the program improve the Department's claims processing efforts?

I realize that the addition of presumptive conditions to the herbicide list has increased the VBA workload. However, as noted by Deputy Secretary Gould, the VA has invested over \$300 million in the last several years to hire and train new employees. Nevertheless, your Department is still falling short of its goals and the Nation's expectations. I appreciate your renewed efforts to manage this issue. I second your sentiment that no veteran should be made to wait for the care the nation is obligated to give them. I encourage transparency on this issue and welcome a response, not only in word, but by decisive action.

Sincerely,



J. RANDY FORBES
Member of Congress